

The anti-liberation movements

This is an edited version of a talk given by veteran communist Alan Lipman who participated in drawing up the Freedom Charter in 1955, about why he left the Communist Party and the ANC, subsequently becoming an anarchist. He was addressing a two-day workshop held by the Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Front at the invitation of the now defunct Anti-Privatisation Forum, on class, capitalism, apartheid, neo-liberalism and the ANC, which was held at the headquarters of the Orange Farm Crisis Committee on May 21 this year (2006). The talk was given in English and translated into seSotho.

I joined the Communist Party of South Africa in 1948 as a Wits student. Before then I had just accepted that the way things were was normal. Then I went to Italy which had a very strong Communist Party and the feeling was that it would seize power any day. The US Third Fleet was patrolling the Mediterranean at that stage and we asked ourselves what they were doing. They were trying to prevent communist take-overs in Italy, Greece and to a lesser extent Spain.

One day I saw a huge crowd running towards me, being chased by the police who were beating them with truncheons. I ducked into a doorway and the shopkeeper took me inside and explained it was a communist meeting addressed by Palmiro Togliatti [the head of the Italian Communist Party]. They were protesting the American presence and I saw how they were treated.

Later when I returned to South Africa, I joined the CPSA under Moses Kotane, Yusuf Dadoo and JB Marks because it was then the only organisation where people from all races came together... In 1955, messages were sent out to community leaders - which was itself a problem, that it was only the leaders - to consult the people on what they wanted from a free society. Thousands of scraps of paper came back, mostly from poor people, saying things such as they wanted to send their children to university. Rusty Bernstein of the SACP [the renamed CPSA] turned all the demands into "The People Shall Govern," because he had that poetic ability. Whatever its faults and problems, the Freedom Charter was a people's document.

THE COMMUNIST BETRAYAL

But in 1956, the Soviet Union invaded Hungary. The whole thing seemed mad to me: I wondered how a people could oppose their own government, and a communist government at that?

The Soviets said they were defending Hungary from the reaction, an argument that they would later use regarding their interventions in Czechoslovakia and Poland, but the more I read about the situation, the more I realised this was not true. My communist ideas were suddenly in danger and my questioning lead me to question the ANC which we all then regarded as the "Big Daddy" of the liberation movements, as our father.

At that time, I worked for New Age, the SACP and ANC newspaper that changed its name several times (each time it was banned we relaunched it under another name until they finally banned us from doing so). My wife worked as a journalist for New Age in Durban, and I also helped out because I was not doing well as an architect. The newspaper was edited by Brian Bunting.

I wrote a letter for the newspaper which I submitted to Bunting, arguing that the ANC as a people's liberation movement should object to the Hungarian invasion and I said that Chief Albert Lutuli [then head of the ANC], who I'd met and respected very much, should lead

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such a campaign. Bunting initially refused to publish it, only later printing it in a very censored form.

At that stage I worked on New Age with Mac Maharaj, but he was away doing something. I met some very fine people in the Communist Party and they introduced me to the world and taught me philosophy... At that time I was - and I don’t think I’m being boastful here - quite an influential member of the Party.

But later, when the Soviet Union invaded Poland and Czechoslovakia, you’d find there was always someone in the local Party who would explain it away as a good thing. I came from a middle-class family but it was members of the Party who were my friends. Then when I began to criticise the Soviet Union, which was where we believed there was real socialism and people were equal, my friends began freezing me out.

I became isolated: socially, economically and intellectually. I started reading other material and came out of communism, though it was later my son who turned me into an anarchist: which shows that you often learn more from your children than your parents!

[After leaving the SACP, Lipman and a few other disaffected members successfully firebombed the office where the apartheid state held the records that were being compiled to include black women in the hated pass-law system that so severely restricted black men's movement. For a year, he fought alongside the African Resistance Movement which conducted several anti-apartheid bombings, but became disenchanted with its "feeble liberalism" and left it].

THE DIVISIONS OF APARTHEID

One strange story is that one day when I lived in Hillbrow... Detective-Sergeant Johan Coetzee - later General Johan Coetzee, the head of BOSS [the secret police agency, the Bureau Of State Security] knocked on my door and he and his policemen searched my flat and took all the books and shook them out to see if he could find anything hidden in them.

He found a poem by Eugene Marais, which is good for a winter day like today: "O koud is die windjie en skraal / En blink in die dof-lig en kaal...": "Oh cold is the wind and thin / And shining in the dusk and naked..." He was surprised that I, a Jodse komunis [Jewish communist] read Afrikaans poetry. He asked me if I liked the poem and I said of course. He said "It's a wonderful poem."

Then he found another poem, where I'd written in the margins that it was Boy Scout rubbish:

"Gee my 'n roer in my regterhand; gee mey 'n bok wat vlug oor die rand..." ["Give me a rifle in my right hand; give me a buck that flees over the ridge..."]. He said he didn't like that one either. He found my rugby clothes and asked me what team I played for. I could see he was wondering what someone like me was doing playing his game.

He then found some papers that my wife Beata had hidden under some shirts. He looked at them, then looked at me, then called out to his men that they were finished the search. I never knew why he did that. Perhaps under other circumstances, Johan Coetzee and I could have been friends.

Later at the TRC [Truth and Reconciliation Commission, held 10 years ago], I saw him there, but I didn't talk to him, because I was there to support [ANC member] Marius Schoon whose wife Jeanette and six-year-old daughter Katryn were blown up in a bomb planted by [Security Branch spy] Craig Williamson's people...

[Lipman later said that Coetzee was the one who had tipped him off that he was on a list of militants targeted for arrest in what became the Rivonia Treason Trial. Lipman, having passed on Coetzee's warning to the liberation movements, was out of the country at the time

of the 1963 Rivonia raid that netted Nelson Mandela and other top ANC and SACP leaders.

Lipman thus narrowly escaped becoming a long-term Robben Island political prisoner. He said he never discovered why Coetzee tipped him off.

[After fleeing into exile in the United Kingdom where he sat on the national council of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). After being attracted to various libertarian socialist critiques of Stalinism, he became an anarchist. Lipman, who returned to South Africa in the early 1990s after 30 years in exile and wrote his memoirs, which will soon be published by the ZACF, is a living link between the generation that rejected the ANC and SACP's false vision in the 1950s - and those like the ZACF who reject it today.]

THE PARTY FEARS THE PEOPLE

I always liked the phrase from the feminist movement: "The personal is the political and the political is the personal." In other words, your economic oppression is your personal problem

- but it is also a real public issue. For example, hundreds of golf courses have sprung up after 1994 and they consume so much water, yet you are battling to get clean water to drink in your homes.

I left the "official" liberation movements for personal reasons, but I still support the real liberation. [President Thabo] Mbeki's a clever man, but I don't trust him as far as I can throw this building. I've seen too many forced evictions from this supposed "world class city" of ours where those who have remove those who they say make dirt or who don't look smart.

We live in a country in which the hopes of the past have been pushed into the dirt. I guess I'd be seen as an "ultra-left" in Mbeki's terms.

My philosophy used to be the Christian "Do unto others as you'd have them do unto you,"

which is not a bad rule for life. But as an anarchist, to me, the most important truth is that humans can manage their own affairs. You don't need leaders; leaders are mostly dangerous people. The reason that the Communist Party today is the same as any other party and behaves in the authoritarian fashion it does is because it doesn't trust the people. I also believe that what you do to get what you want is as important as what you want.

The newspapers are owned by big corporations and they tell the stories they want to hear. But although the newspapers have behaved disgustingly over the Zuma affair [the acquittal in May on a rape charge of ANC deputy president Jacob Zuma], there is no real difference between Mbeki and Zuma. It won't be better under Zuma. I spent 35 years of my life supporting the liberation struggle but the ANC is now an anti-liberation movement. Now we need a real "People's National Congress" - under people's control - to take back real liberation forward.